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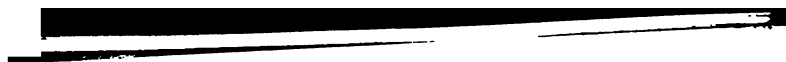


*An Idyl from
Nantucket*

WITH A NOTE BY
REV. ROBERT COLLYER







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Nantucket*

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An Idyl from Nantucket.

NANTUCKET is an island off the coast of Massachusetts, the manuals tell us, some seventeen miles long by three to five wide. It stands well out in the ocean, as we learn for ourselves who love to go there, and is haunted by the ghosts of ancient mariners—whalers in truth, who made the place famous in their time, and wealthy, by scouring the seas in search of this most noble game, and were among the first men in this new world to prove that you *can* “draw out leviathan with an hook, and fill his skin with barbed irons,”

4 *An 'Idyl from Nantucket.*

when " he makes the sea boil like a pot, and part him among the merchants."

It is about the cleanest bit of land, so far as the white man is concerned, we know of on this planet, and was first settled about the year 1659, when a few families came over from the Puritan mainland to make a new home where they could be free from the yoke which had grown heavy there, and live their own life in their own way.

A good " Friend," now gone to her rest, who was born on the island, used to tell us about the life there when this century came in, and it was like a chapter from some realized Utopia. The standard of morals was so high and the safeguards so sure, that keeping the commandments was a matter of course. They were careful to treat the red man they found on the island as a poor human brother ; took him with them on long voyages after whales, and found him a capital whaler ; ploughed and sowed his

land for him in the spring, if the humor was on him to go "Indianing" round, instead of attending to it himself, and made one of them a justice of the peace to his own people, who adjudged in the first case that came before him that plaintiff and defendant were six and half-a-dozen, and ordered each of them a good, sound whipping.

The old breed lost its grip on the island a good many years ago, when their game was getting scarce in the two oceans, and in '49 the finer spirits set sail for San Francisco, when the news came to the island that gold had turned up there, and fortunes were to be made in a year. Then Nantucket had to take a back seat, with about one-third the population that swarmed on her when whaling was at its best, for the clean land brings "cleanness of teeth," as the Scripture saith, being mostly sand, and a thin sort of pasture, from which the tilth of uncounted centuries was blown into the

6 *An Idyl from Nantucket.*

sea when they cut down the timber and turned up the sod. But the place has been "discovered" again, and is slowly coming to the front as a safe refuge from the fervent fires that smite our cities in July and August, and as in all ways a pleasant place. With those wild, fresh downs running the whole length of the island, a bit of white heather here and there, and sweet fern, briar-roses and blackberries, and a deplorable sort of grape a fox would despise anyhow, if there were any on the island. Little lakes of sweet water, fed by springs so good to drink that the waters of the Nile would seem like marah to a true-born Nantucketer by comparison. A town worth a visit for its own sake, reminding you of the saying, "Queer as Dick's hatband, that went nine times round and then wouldn't tie," but with some right noble souls left, of the old fine strain, and some right noble mansions. "What's the matter there?" the writer said, pointing to one of

An Idyl from Nantucket. 7

them, which was falling away to ruin. "Well," the old salt answered, "I'll tell ye. That air house was left to a lot of fools who can't make ther fingers even the same length; one wants to ketch a' holt, and then another furdur in nor the rest, then the others turn in and rap 'em, an' so its a gitt'n sort o' out o' repair." And then about island and town the zone of the sea, where you can catch blue fish, sculp, plaice, and sharks—these last in great plenty, and so mighty in their wrath that it was a question with one man I know whether he should get the fellow out or it should get him in, a problem solved finally in his favor by the help of the laughter-loving editor of the *Burlington Hawkeye*.

Frederick Sanford belongs on Nantucket by birth and breeding, and a love for the place which grows deeper and sweeter with the years. He has great store of scrap-books and journals, together with "a routh of auld nic nackets,"

8 *An Idyl from Nantucket.*

wonderful to see, but especially to hear of. Also delectable things to eat and smell at, and so on, from India and China, and a fine grace at handing them round. Grace *with* meat. "Here's something," Master Sanford said, after he had given us a "squantom"—Nantucket for the above-named delectables—"here's something you ought to read." The original old yellow letter is lost, but I have read it. I guess it never came out of the office where we had it printed, still this is a true copy. It seemed to the writer of this note well worth the copy made for a chance at a wider circulation and a finer outfit, and its readers will agree, he trusts, that as a picture of the life on the little island in the old simple days, the very days we notice Scott has touched with such a rare radiance in "Waverley," it leaves nothing for desire.

ROBERT COLLYER.

NEW YORK, December 1, 1885.

An Idyl from Nantucket. 9

"STARBUCK PLANTATION, NANTUCKET,

"September 20, 1745.

"MY OWN DEAR MOTHER :

"It seems a long time since you and my honoured father and my ever dear brothers and sisters started for your new home ; but I suppose you have not yet reached your destination, and I think of you every day and all day long as marching and marching, following the lonely trail through the forests, and sometimes I am tempted to repine in that my father thought it best to remove to that far-away settlement. But my grandfather tells me that the entertaining of this sentiment would be unworthy the daughter of a pioneer, and since it was thought best for me to remain on the island for a season, I must improve my time to the best advantage ; and this I try to do with cheerfulness, and Aunt Content is so kind as to say that I am of service to her in our household duties and in spinning and weaving.

10 *An Idyl from Nantucket.*

“Peradventure, my letter shall be a puzzle to you, so I hasten to say that I indite a paragraph or two upon leisure, and whenever anything comes into my mind I desire you to know I straightway go to my uncle's desk and set it down. I do this, dear mother, that you may share in my pleasant thoughts, and may know of my daily life ; also that my brothers and sisters may in a measure partake of my enjoyment.

“The principal news I have to tell is that my cousin, Nathaniel Starbuck, Jr., has returned to Boston from his late long voyage to China, and is now hourly looked for here, where there are divers preparations being made for his welcoming. My grandfather walks restlessly up and down with his stout stick, peering anxiously up the roadway by which our traveller must come. Uncle Nathaniel says, with pride, ‘The boy will have many stories to tell.’ Aunt Content flits about with a smile on her face, and anon

with tears in her eyes, concocting the dishes of which her son used to be so fond ; while dear old grandmother knits and knits, because she says, ‘Than’el never yet wore any stockings but of my make, and I must have a supply for him to take on his next voyage ;’ while I am to have a new blue gown made from my aunt’s last web, which is the finest and softest piece of flannel ever made on the island.

“ My cousin has come. He is tall and lithe, with handsome hair and eyes, and his complexion is bronzed by the ocean winds and eastern suns. He says it seems to him like a fairy tale that I am the same little dumpling of a cousin he used to toss in the air when he was last home. He is much grieved to find you are all gone, and is planning a hunting expedition, whose objective point shall be your far-away settlement.

“ The neighbours all congregated around our kitchen fire to hear his wonderful stories and

12 *An Idyl from Nantucket.*

adventures, which he was relating all day long and far into the night; and for all he has travelled almost over the whole world, he is as pleased as a boy to be at home on the dear old Nantucket plantation again. We are all as happy as we can be with our divided hearts, and all have a frequent thought and wish for our wanderers, while grandfather remembers you each morning and evening at the Throne of Grace.

“ My cousin has brought a great many curiosities and presents for us all. One is a silken creamy shawl for me, woven and embroidered with beautiful flowers. Another is a gown of foamy Canton crape, as white as snow, and they are so pretty I am sure I shall never dare to wear them. Grandma says they shall be kept for my wedding. Aunt Esther says it is not seemly for such thoughts to be put into a maiden’s head, but Aunt Content gave me the other day a whole piece of linen from the Fall

bleach to be kept, she said, for a day of need.


“At all events, my finery is packed away in gums and spices in a foreign box, and is not likely to turn any silly maiden’s head at present.

“Cousin has returned to Boston, and yesterday he sent by a trusty messenger another sea-chest. It is a large box of tea, the first that was ever seen on the island, real Chinese, which Nat himself procured in China. It is of a greenish color, with little shrivelled leaves, and when eaten dry has a pleasant, spicy taste. Perhaps when I send this letter I can inclose some, that you may see what it is like. He also sent a letter saying that when he returns to Nantucket, the owner of the ship in which he voyaged, Captain Morris, will come with him from Boston to pay us a visit.

“We are again making master preparations for visitors; and if you will believe it, the great

14 *An Idyl from Nantucket.*

parlour, which has not been used since Aunt Mehitable's wedding, is to be opened. The floor has been newly waxed and polished, and we have spread down here and there beautiful mats which Cousin Nat brought, with many curious and handsome things which are hung on the walls and spread on the table and mantelpiece; and the huge fire of logs the sharp weather now renders needful in the chimney, sends out such a glow that you can have no conception how finely the room appears. I was admiring it this morning, when Aunt Esther rebuked me gravely, saying, 'The bright things of this world are of short duration;' but dear, gentle grandma said, with a smile, that it was natural and right for the young to admire beauty, at which Aunt Esther seemed much displeased. I sometimes think she does not like me because I am young, but that cannot be. Yet I cannot quite understand how, being my own sweet mother's sister, she can be so unlike her.



An Idyl from Nantucket. 15

"We have just had tidings that cousin Nat and his friend Captain Morris intend to arrive here on December 31st. Uncle Nathaniel says he will have a tea-party, and invite Lieutenant Macey's family, and Uncle Edward Starbuck's family, and a few others, to meet our guests, and to 'sit the old year out and the new year in.'

"We cooked a beautiful dinner, and our guests all came. I wore my new blue gown, with some lace grandma gave me in the neck, and my own dear mother's gold necklace.¹ I tied back my curls, that Cousin Nat will not allow me to braid, with a blue ribbon which he bought in London. Aunt Esther said men dislike to see girls look so brave, but grandpa kissed me and called me 'a bonnie bluebell.'

"Aunt Content has been much pestered in her mind because she knew not how to serve the tea or to cook it, and after our neighbours were assembled she confided to them her perplexity.

¹ Beads still in favor with ancient women in New England.

They all gathered round the chest, smelling and tasting the fragrant herb. Mrs. Macey said she had heard it ought to be well cooked to make it palatable; Aunt Edward Starbuck said a lady in Boston who had drunk tea told her it needed a good quantity for a steeping, which was the reason it was so expensive, so Aunt Content hung the bright five-gallon bell-metal kettle on the crane, and putting a two-quart bowlful of tea in it, with plenty of water, swung it over the fire, and Aunt Esther stayed in the kitchen to keep it boiling.

“While I was laying the table I heard Lydia Ann Macey say, ‘I have heard that when tea is drank it gives a brilliancy to the eyes and a youthful freshness to the complexion. I am afraid thy sister-in-law failed to put in enough of the leaves.’ So Aunt Esther put in another bowlful. When the tea had boiled an hour, my cousin and Captain Morris arrived. Then the tea, which had boiled down to about a gallon,

An Idyl from Nantucket. 17

was poured into grandma's great silver tankard and carried to the table, and each guest was provided with one of her silver porringers ; also with cream and lumps of sugar.

"The captain talked to me before dinner, and I told him, before I knew I was getting confidential, how you were all off in the wilds. He said enterprise was what the new country needed, and that it was not best to have Nantucket peopled entirely with Starbucks. That I was one of the old stock it was plain to be seen, he said, if my name was Wentworth ; and then he looked pleasantly around the circle of the Starbucks. I suppose I do not resemble them at all.¹ I saw Aunt Esther looking at me so sharply that I remembered she had often told me it was not seemly to talk with men ; so presently I became discreetly silent. But when dinner was announced the captain took me out and made me sit by him.

¹ They are a handsome race.

“ After grandpa had asked a blessing on the food, Aunt Content said to her son and his friend, ‘ I have made a dish of tea for you, but am fearful it is not rightly made, and would like to have your opinion ; ’ whereupon my cousin and the captain looked and sniffed at the tea, and my cousin made answer, ‘ As my loved mother desires my opinion, I must needs tell her that a spoonful of this beverage, which she hath with such hospitable intent prepared for us, would go nigh to kill any one at this table,’ and the captain said laughingly, that my aunt could keep the decoction to dye the woollens. He further said he would instruct us how to draw the tea, ‘ and this young lady,’ he said, turning to me, ‘ shall make the first dish of tea ever made on Nantucket.’ So the tea was made by his direction and poured into the tankard Aunt Content had got ready, and the captain carried it to the table for me and helped to pour it into the porringers for the guests. He

was so kind also as to say it was the best dish of tea he had ever tasted.¹

“ We had a wholesome dinner, and enjoyable withal. Cousin Nat told stories and sang songs, in which Captain Morris joined him, and then the happy new year’s greetings took the place of the good-bys when our neighbours left for their homes.

“ My cousin’s friend still stays for the shooting, and there is not much spinning and weaving done, for it takes so much time for the cooking and the eating and the visiting. He is very agreeable, and calls grandfather ‘the Miles Standish of Nantucket.’ I heard him tell Uncle Nathaniel that we had good blood, and ever since he became acquainted with Cousin Nat he had conceived a great admiration for the Nathaniel Starbucks; and he said something about a wife. Perhaps he remains here on Aunt Esther’s account; but, dear me,

¹ The rogue !

20 *An Idyl from Nantucket.*

she is so prim (I write with all respect, dear mother), and he is such a jovial gentleman, I do not understand how such a wedding could be harmonious. If he has a regard for her it must be on account of the Starbuck blood.

“ Oh, my mother, how can I tell you ! It is not for love of Aunt Esther that Captain Morris remains, but your own little daughter ; and all the Starbucks, saving Aunt Esther—who declares I ought to be put back into pinafores—have given their consent that I shall be married and sail away with my husband in his ship to foreign parts, to see for myself all the wonders of which I have heard so much of late. But I will not give my consent until I first have that of my father and mother ; so there is a company being made up to go with Cousin Nat and the captain through the snows to your far-away home.

“ And so, after all, it will be this new friend



An Idyl from Nantucket. 21

of whom I have written so much who will take this long letter to you. I am sure, dear mother, that you who know my heart so well will not think it unseemly for me [to pray] that the Lord will guide your heart and that of my father to feel kindly toward this gentleman; for, indeed, he is of good repute, and is so kind as to be very fond of me; and [if]¹ I feel that I have your consent, and that of my honoured father, together with your blessing, I shall be very happy, and take an honest pride in being his honoured wife.

“The captain declares laughingly that I am sending him on a quest like a knight of old, to prove his love. I cannot help thinking it strange his wanting to marry me, and when I said so one day, he replied gravely, that it was all on account of the tea, which got into his

¹ The maid is all in a tremble along here, and has to be “edited” a mite.

22 *An Idyl from Nantucket.*

head. And, indeed, it may be so, for I was flighty, and hardly shut my eyes to sleep at all the night after partaking of it; and even my dear grandmother says she would not answer for the consequences of what she might be led to do were she to make use of it every day.

“ I send you, with other articies, some of this famous tea, and a bit of the white crape that I shall, if so it seemeth best in the judgment of my honoured father and dear mother, wear as a wedding gown.

“ The household all join me in sending loving greeting to you all [and], I remain, now and ever,

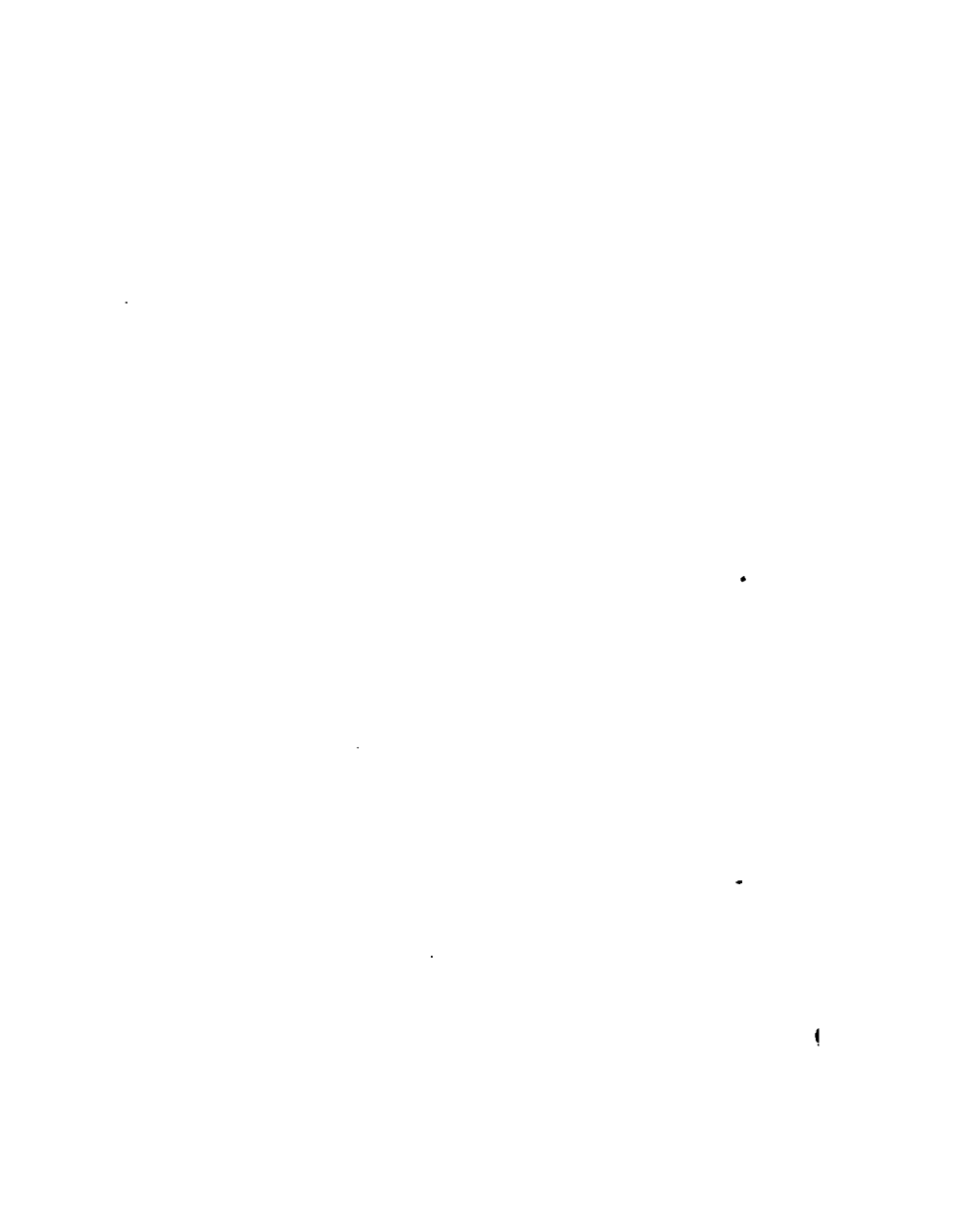
“ Your dutiful and loving daughter,
“ RUTH STARBUCK WENTWORTH.”

So on some day in that midwinter of 1745—old tenor—Captain Morris and Cousin Nat crossed the bar at high tide, sailed up the bay singing sea songs no doubt alow and aloft,

An Idyl from Nantucket. 23

struck the woods at Wood's Holl, and went tramping through the snow, Portsmouth-way perhaps, after the Wentworths in the wilderness; came back duly with a blessing, and then the great parlor would shine again in the great log fire, and all the Starbuck faces would grow radiant, save it may be that of poor Aunt Esther, who had a secret of her own—perhaps Ruth came near guessing—touching the jovial gentleman who bore the maid away from her sweet wild island home.



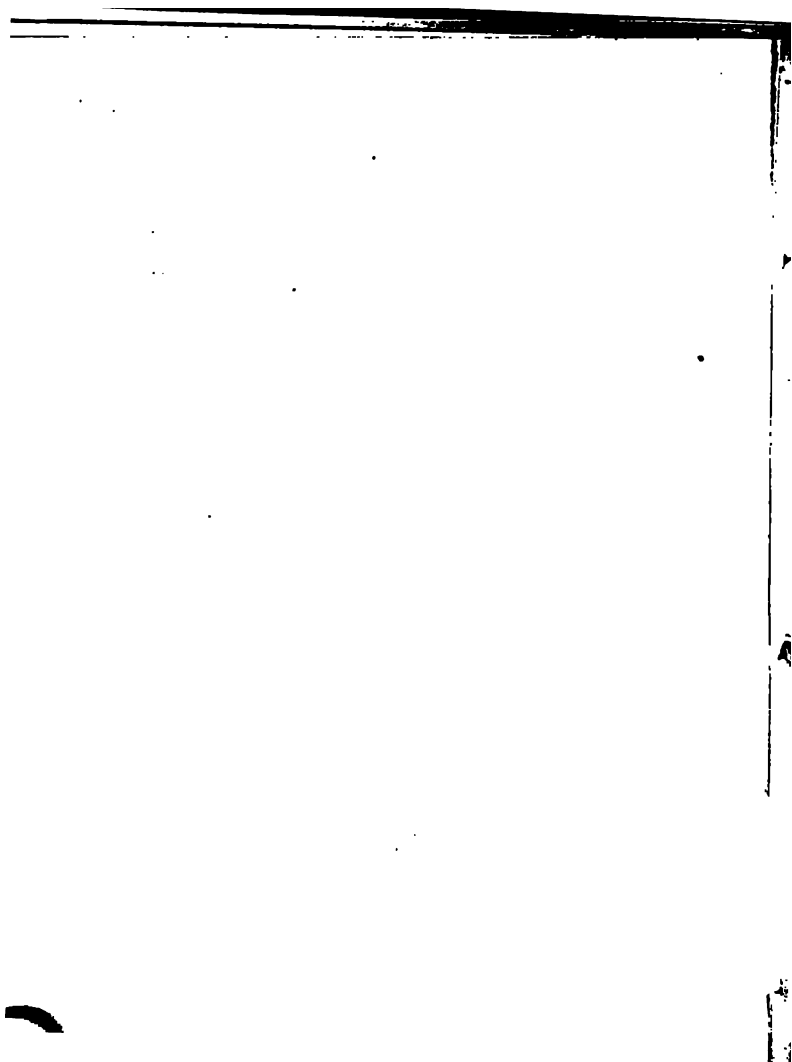


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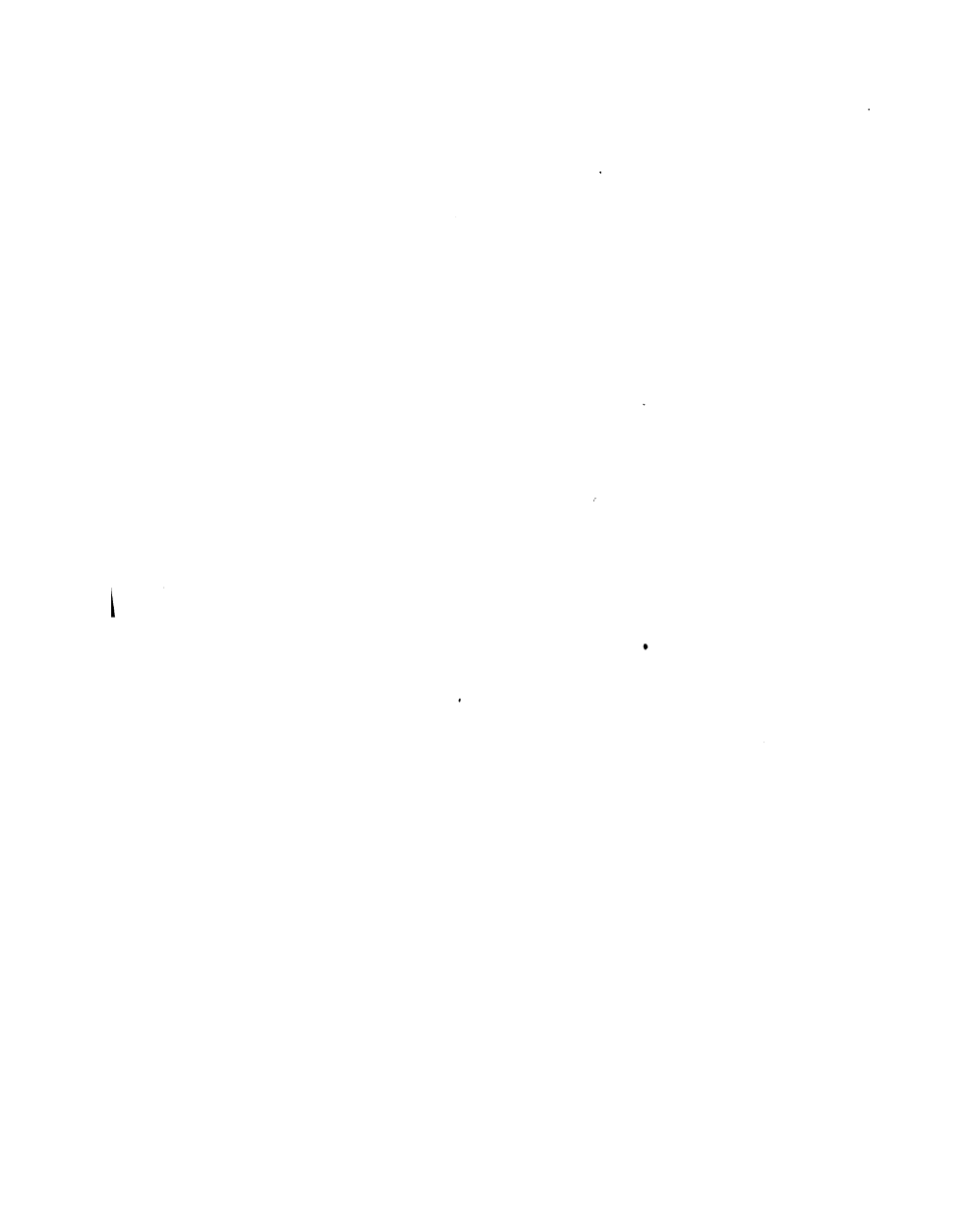
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